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Soviet Foreign Policy at the Crossroads

Although Soviet comments in public and private continue to emphasize the importance of East-West cooperation, in recent weeks there has been an increasingly harsh and discordant note in Soviet statements and behavior on a variety of issues. The differences in approach and tone between opposing aspects of Soviet policy are so striking as to raise the possibility of leadership differences on detente as well as a diffusion of central direction and even authority within the Soviet leadership. In view of General Secretary Brezhnev's myriad health problems--particularly his uneven performance in Paris two weeks ago--it is time to examine whether newly modified power relationships among top Soviet leaders have emboldened critics of Brezhnev's detente policy to try to exert greater influence on the shaping of Soviet foreign policy.

This speculative essay examines the possibility of pressure on the current Soviet leadership to move away from previous guidelines on the importance of East-West cooperation. Comments are welcome and may be addressed to the author, [redacted].

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The Leitmotif of Soviet Propaganda

A recent exchange of views in Soviet party journals on the issue of East-West cooperation tends to support the conclusion that a debate has been going on within the Kremlin on the conduct of foreign affairs. An article late last year in the communist party journal Kommunist by V. V. Zagladin, the deputy chief of the central committee's International Department, and I. T. Frolov, then chief editor of the monthly magazine of the Institute of Philosophy, argued for "intensive economic and scientific-technical cooperation of states with different social systems" as well as a "smashing of old customs and understandings" about global problems. They concluded that East-West collaboration could solve a variety of economic and social issues and, in an apparent aside to internal critics, argued that cooperation would not mean a "renunciation of class struggle as all kinds of 'leftists' sometimes try to portray." (Emphasis added.)

In April of this year, one of the co-authors of this polemical article, Frolov, lost his chief editorship and was replaced by V. S. Semenov, whose writings have been much more conservative than those of his predecessor. That same month, V. V. Kortunov, writing in the journal of Soviet party history, challenged the moderate Frolov-Zagladin thesis. Kortunov denounced cooperative efforts to cope with global problems, which he said ignored the "division of the world into two systems" and provided "in the final analysis only for the salvation of capitalism." Kortunov, who apparently was one of the "leftists" Frolov and Zagladin had in mind, until recently served as a personal assistant to former president Podgorny.

Moscow Goes on the Offensive in the West

In view of Kortunov's militant stance, Podgorny's ouster from the Politburo the following month might have been interpreted as a setback for the policy preferences of Kremlin hardliners. So far, this has not been the case. Since Podgorny's removal from the Politburo and presidency, there has been an acceleration of an ongoing Soviet propaganda offensive over their relations with the US, European communists, the Japanese communist party, and the PRC.

The Soviets have been particularly hard on President Carter, whom they regard as the inspiration for recent foreign and domestic criticism of the USSR. A Soviet journalist recently claimed, according [redacted] that their propaganda offensive was urgently needed to combat the President's "demagogy" on human rights. Brezhnev himself recently told [redacted] that Moscow was "astonished" by President Carter's position on a variety of issues. The Soviet press, spurred by a sense of Soviet vulnerability to Mr. Carter's policies, has attacked the new US president by name only six months after his assumption of office. These personal attacks have been accompanied by an increase in Soviet warnings that US policies are threatening to undermine detente.

More recently, the Soviets also made two stinging personal attacks on Spanish communist leader Santiago Carrillo, actions which will further seriously strained relations with the Spanish party and have complicated Moscow's relations with the French and Italian parties as well. The attack had no parallel in Moscow's past quarrels with the independent-minded Western parties, and appeared to reflect Soviet frustration with their failure to silence critics among the Eurocommunists.

These Soviet attacks were reminiscent of a hard-line article on communist party tactics that appeared in August 1975, and received a personal endorsement from Brezhnev. The article, written by the editor of the international communist journal Problems of Peace and Socialism, Konstantin Zarodov, argued that the West European parties should put revolutionary integrity ahead of cooperation with non-communist parties and should not let democratic procedures stand in the way of seizing power. Several weeks after the appearance of the article in Pravda, the Soviet press announced that Brezhnev had had a highly unusual meeting with Zarodov. This peculiar event suggested that Brezhnev then felt he needed to appease political pressure from the right.

. . . and on the Offensive in the East

Even before Moscow's determined effort to silence its foreign critics in the West, there was the beginning

of a propaganda campaign in the East as well. Less than two weeks before Podgorny's abrupt ouster from the Politburo, Pravda unleashed the most vituperative attack on the Chinese leadership since Mao's death last year. The article in Pravda bore the signature "I. Aleksandrov," an indication that it carried the Soviet leadership's stamp of approval, and seemed to convey the Kremlin's pessimism and frustration, this time with the policy directions of the new regime in Peking. The article was designed primarily to discourage any US consideration of arms sales to China, according

The Aleksandrov article was followed by a Foreign Ministry note, which was publicized two days after Podgorny's ouster, objecting to a mounting campaign of "slander" against the USSR in Peking. It is highly unusual for Moscow to publicize a Foreign Ministry note expressing a general protest against Chinese polemics. In recent years, publicized protests have been pegged to specific incidents, such as Peking's expulsion of Soviet diplomats on espionage charges in 1974 or its detention of a Soviet helicopter and crew that same year. Tass handling of the protest suggested that it was designed for world opinion more than for the Peking leadership.

Speaking at a Kremlin dinner in honor of Bulgarian President Zhivkov on May 30, Brezhnev personally weighed in with a general indictment of Peking's policies. He added that there were forces both "inside and outside of China" who want to worsen Sino-Soviet relations and fuel international tensions, presumably addressing his remarks to the US and Japan.

Last month, the Soviets also went out of their way to worsen relations with the Japanese communist party. In an authoritative Pravda editorial article, the Soviets rejected the Japanese party's claim that the Northern Territories rightfully belong to Japan.

Moscow Tightens Up at Home

In addition to making a determined effort to silence their foreign critics on a variety of issues, the Soviets are turning the screws on their internal critics as well

as those Americans who have been connected with them. If the Soviets follow through on their threats against arrested Jewish activist Anatoly Shcharansky, who is being charged with treason, he would become the first dissident leader to be tried on charges of such gravity under the Brezhnev regime. Similarly, American journalist Robert Toth was the first Western reporter since the beginning of the human rights controversy to be subjected to policy interrogation and the implicit threat of trial and imprisonment. More recently, an American defense attache was stopped and searched in Moscow's Red Square. This occasionally happens in the provinces but rarely in Moscow.

The actions taken against Shcharansky and Toth are of course related, and they were clearly meant to have an impact beyond the cases of these two individuals. The Soviets are bent on stifling contacts between Soviet dissidents and foreign journalists by warning both groups of the possible cost of their actions. Moscow also wants to destroy the domestic appeal of the dissidents by depicting them as creatures of foreign interests, particularly Washington's.

More recently, the Soviets disclosed that Aleksander Ginsburg, once one of the USSR's most active dissidents, would be charged with anti-Soviet activity, which carries a maximum penalty of seven years imprisonment and five additional years of internal exile.*

The Role of the KGB

There are two worrisome aspects of this campaign which suggest that reactionary forces are asserting themselves within the leadership and trying to inhibit increased cooperation with the West.

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*Prominent dissident Yuri Orlov, who founded a group last year to monitor Soviet compliance with the human rights guarantees of the Helsinki accords, faces a similar charge.

--The first aspect is the increased use of the KGB to control internal dissidence, which was particularly manifest during the crude interrogation of Toth.

--The second is the blatantly anti-Semitic aspect of the harrassment of the dissidents--most of whom are also Jewish activists--with Moscow clearly trying to exploit traditional Russian bias against Jews. US embassy officials and journalists, who have been cited, were also Jewish in nearly every case.

Soviet authorities have obviously decided that it is worth extirpating organized dissidence even at the cost of a great deal of unfavorable publicity in the West.

Soviet Motivation

There are a variety of explanations of these recent signs of Soviet xenophobia, and some tend to imply that Brezhnev's policies are being challenged within the Politburo and that as at other times in the past the Soviet leadership has decided--or indeed has been forced--to take a more conservative tack on external issues. There is also the increased evidence of political uncertainty and maneuvering in the Kremlin as well as the possibility that there will be other major changes within the leadership in the wake of Podgorny's ouster.

One obvious explanation for bumptious Soviet rhetoric for the past two months has been Moscow's frustration and possible anxiety over the paucity of significant foreign policy successes over the past year, particularly in those areas where Brezhnev has some personal attachment and is thus vulnerable. The Soviets appear to be disoriented by US diplomatic initiatives and act as if they are unsure how to react to them.

In sum, Brezhnev's critics are likely to feel that many things are going wrong and some of them may have made the judgment that the party chief can no longer cope with a long string of reverses. The Soviet relationship with the US is continuing to deteriorate without commensurate

gains elsewhere in the West. The issues stemming from the European security conference in 1975 have proved troublesome, and Moscow is clearly on the defensive at the preparatory meetings in Belgrade because of the human rights issue. The Soviets are also plagued by dissension among the West European communist parties and have thus far been unable to arrange a unified Soviet bloc approach to the challenge of Eurocommunism. In addition to these difficulties, the leadership is contending with a sluggish economy and continued food distribution problems, with more serious economic problems on the horizon.

Certainly the timing of some of Moscow's recent moves can be explained by the Belgrade meeting. The Soviets were anxious to head off any Western efforts at the conference to formalize an indictment of Soviet internal practices, which would explain recent propaganda attacks and threats to stage show trials of leading dissident figures. Soviet warnings and punitive actions are designed to inhibit the activities of the activists at home as well as to inform adherents of detente that the future of East-West cooperation may not be bright.

At the same time, these harsher Soviet statements are apparently designed to cater to more conservative forces at home as well as to intimidate opponents abroad. The attack on Carrillo, for example, is at odds with the professed Soviet interest in detente and may have been intended as a stop to Brezhnev's senior rivals within the Politburo--particularly chief ideologue M. A. Suslov, who is the senior member of the Politburo in terms of service. The shrill statements on human rights and the pressure on the dissidents at home would also be ingratiating to such forces on the right as Suslov and candidate Politburo member P. M. Masherov. The criticism of the US has recently been accelerated despite US willingness to blunt the extent to which it is in fact pressing the USSR on many human rights issues.

The Brezhnev-Suslov Relationship

The possibility that criticism from the right--particularly from Suslov--may be proving to be a problem for

Brezhnev is reflected in the draft constitution text, which takes several bows in the interests of the senior party secretary. The first three "tasks" identified for the current stage of the USSR's development are placed in the field of ideology, Suslov's bailiwick. Also important symbolically is the fact that, in a brief foreign policy section, the pledge to peaceful coexistence ranked behind support for national-liberation struggles, another point congenial to the party's old man.

Brezhnev and Suslov have also apparently disagreed on the permanence of the arrangement by which Brezhnev holds both the General Secretaryship and the Presidency. Suslov, when he proposed the move, asserted that the party plenum in May had found it expedient for Brezhnev to hold both jobs. Brezhnev in effect contradicted him, claiming that the plenum had decided to combine the two jobs. Under Suslov's formulation, Brezhnev could be semi-retired to the Presidency alone by a future plenum decision. Under Brezhnev's formulation, a future plenum would have to separate the two jobs again before he could be semi-retired. The plenum resolution has not been published, but Pravda has used the Brezhnev formulation, indicating that the matter has, at least temporarily, been resolved in Brezhnev's favor. Nevertheless, this public exchange suggests that Brezhnev has not yet consolidated his political advance in taking over the Presidency, and that he may face continued challenge from Suslov on this score--at a time when his health may be weaker.

Following Brezhnev's trip to Paris, [redacted] that Suslov may be the most important figure in the Soviet hierarchy at the moment. While this judgment is probably somewhat exaggerated, Suslov has in fact been playing a prominent role since the party plenum and was rumored to have played a key part in the removal of Podgorny from the Politburo. There are signs that Suslov's influence has increased in recent months and we would expect any pay-off to him to be in terms of policy orientation rather than in political position.

Soviet Policy Direction

If Suslov has recently been able to increase his already considerable influence over the direction of foreign policy, this would help to explain recent harsh Soviet gestures as reflecting a wish by a Suslov-led consensus to demonstrate a position of strength to foreign adversaries as well as their own political constituency.

Thus far, however, there has been no consistent pattern to these signals, which could portend a fundamental charge in policy direction but which also could mean only a momentary hiatus in Soviet efforts to maintain continued cooperation with the West. The shrill message directed at the US appears to be primarily designed not to signal a definite end to detente, but rather to make the US, and not the USSR, chiefly responsible for detente's deflated expectations. The timing of the signals has been haphazard, and the abrasive gestures have been accompanied by certain more conciliatory ones, suggesting that Soviets themselves have not made up their minds. A delegation to the USSR from the National War College was treated in a friendly manner last month and polemics were avoided. Various working group sessions on such subjects as the test ban issue and the Indian Ocean have found the Soviets serious in their approach. The semi-annual "Silver Fox" mission, which is intended to demonstrate the right of free navigation in the Black Sea, did not draw unusual Soviet reaction last month. And Soviet Foreign Trade Minister Patolichev, who publicly put on an abrasive show in Washington last month, [redacted] commented that his talks with Vice President Mondale and Secretary of State Vance were "most satisfactory."

There have been similar balancing acts in other areas. Two weeks after the stinging attack on the Spanish communist party, Moscow backed off slightly and called for "solidarity" in the face of imperialist efforts to split the communist movement. Then, on July 6, the Soviet communist party--following talks with the Belgium party--supported "independent" strategies for every communist party. Meanwhile, a tough line went out to the Japanese communist party, but a conciliatory one went to the Japanese government. Soviet charges against the Chinese have been accompanied by Brezhnev's call for "normal

good neighbor relations" with the PRC. The carefully orchestrated scenario for Shcharansky has been followed by the emigration of two prominent Jewish activists, although only after they made depositions on their ties with Shcharansky. Soviet propaganda attacks against dissidents have been matched by recent invitations to five West European countries to observe military exercises in the Ukraine later this month, which is stipulated by the Helsinki accords for large-scale maneuvers.

The Price of Brezhnev's Advances

On balance, however, the Soviets are clearly moving away from the etiquette of detente, and further moves will be dependent in large part on future US behavior. At the same time, it is reasonably clear that Moscow has not yet reached any firm decision about the prospects for the policy of detente and that the internal dynamics of the Soviet political situation will affect the evolution of that decision. Similarly, the readjustment in the handling of Eurocommunists is a likely example of some uncertainty in the USSR, and Soviet behavior has suggested the continued existence of divided counsels. Both previous and recent reporting has indicated that the Soviets were divided between those who want open polemics and direct confrontation with the Eurocommunists and those who believe that such harsh tactics would only be counterproductive to Soviet interests in retaining influence over the Western communists.

In sum, the evidence cited can be interpreted to suggest that Brezhnev is on the defensive in trying to salvage some freedom of maneuver in relations with the West and may be facing serious opposition from the troglodytes within the Politburo. But there have been no irreversible Soviet moves in this regard, and even a successor to Brezhnev could emerge in a position to pursue detente, despite the blatant rhetorical steps of the past two months.

Nevertheless, Brezhnev's political advances over the past two months, in achieving both the presidency and the constitution, may thus far have been registered at the cost of yielding on certain of his policy interests

vis-a-vis the US and West Europe. If there has been a trade-off along these lines, then Brezhnev's victory may have been a pyrrhic one that will work against Washington's interests.